

NARRATOR: Bernie Nielsen
INTERVIEWER: Troy Reeves
DATE: October 19, 1999
LOCATION: Boise, Idaho
PROJECT: Smokejumpers

Tape

Counter	Summary
000	Introduction
010	Nielsen is a native of Idaho. He spent most of his life in western Idaho, except for his time in the military. He went to school at Boise Junior College and after smokejumping began working at the phone company.
025	Nielsen's brother told him about the smokejumpers. He and his friend, Leo Compton joined in 1947. Nielsen jumped through the 1950 fire season. He jumped on 41 fires, which were all in Idaho except for one jump in Oregon.
045	For his one jump in Oregon, he was called back to McCall before he began to fight the fire.
060	Nielsen remembered his first jump, except he said he blacked-out briefly until the parachute opened. His first year he did practice jumps in a meadow. His first fire jump was a four-person jump in central Idaho, near the Middlefork of the Salmon River.
080	A pack string was sent in, which was a man with a group of mules. The pack string helped the smokejumpers by carrying their equipment. Nielsen talked about the parachutes and the equipment that was put into their pack. Wayne Webb, who worked at the McCall camp and jumped, designed the pack. He continued to talk about what clothes they wore during the jump, including a helmet and a hard hat. He told a story about a jumper who vomited before nearly every jump.
120	Nielsen talked about the fear involved with jumping out of an airplane.
140	The tool called the Pulaski was very helpful for the smokejumpers. Nielsen talked about the history, the shape, and the use of the tool. Nielsen liked the Pulaski, but he also used the small shovel very effectively.
160	Nielsen detailed the steps from when the jumpers landed to their return to the base camp. He talked about one fire that began with two smokejumpers and ended with nearly 200 fire fighters. Nielsen lost his shirt on that fire. It burned when he put it on a log, and the fire got to it

before he did. Sometimes when the jumpers walked out they cleared the trail in front of them. He told a story about clearing a trail to Chamberlain Basin and trying to scare some children before they flew out. When the season was slow, smokejumpers worked on other projects during the summer. Nielsen remembered a man who coined the term, "Cumulus Overtimus," which were clouds that looked like they might have lightning in them.

- 240 Nielsen provided some general information about the former smokejumpers' camp in McCall, Idaho. In 1988 a new modern base was built.
- 255 Packing chutes was a job that every smokejumper eventually did. Nielsen packed chutes, but he never used a chute that he packed himself. No one else ever had a problem with the chutes he packed.
- 275 Nielsen and his co-workers jumped in the Boise, Payette, and Nez Perce National Forests. He furnished information about the small towns that were near or inside these forests including Salmon and McCall, Idaho.
- 300 There was a vigorous training program when the people arrived in June. For a couple of weeks, they trained physically to get back into shape. He told a story about "The Torture Rack" which was an exercise device that was eventually eliminated. Nielsen talked about the exercises, the jumping practice, and the way to climb down a tree.
- 360 Saturday and Sunday were days off, unless you were on a fire. Nielsen talked about his extracurricular activities in McCall. Even though McCall was a small town, they found things to do such as boating, partying, playing baseball and watching movies.
- 400 The Foresters' Club and the Lake Club were two places in McCall to get a drink. Nielsen said there were four or five places they frequented.
- 425 Nielsen mentioned the people he jumped with during the summers, which included his brother Glen "Ace" Nielsen, Leo Compton, Wayne Webb, Lloyd Johnson, Pete Peterson, "Toad" Davidson, "Paperlegs" Peterson, and George Schrieber. This group trained in McCall, which was the first time that happened; smokejumpers originally all trained in Missoula, Montana.
- 450 **END OF SIDE ONE**
SIDE TWO
- 020 Nielsen continued to talk about people's nicknames, such as "Paperlegs" and "Toad." Nielsen never had a nickname.

- 035 Nielsen did not keep in touch with other smokejumpers until about twenty years ago. Once people were retired it was easier to meet. They meet about four times a year for coffee, and they meet in McCall once every four or five years. He elaborated on how the coffee meeting began, how many people attend, and what stories people tell.
- 065 Nielsen mentioned some of the “tall tales” told at the coffee meeting. Leo Compton has told a story about when he and Nielsen met in mid-air. Ray Mansisidor has always told a story about getting stuck in the shroud lines of another jumper.
- 080 Nielsen jumped near a lookout on the Salmon River. He remembered how small the jump area looked. He landed in a clump of trees and stopped about a foot before the ground.
- 100 The fire near Sheep Creek burgeoned from a two-person fire to a nearly two hundred person fire. Nielsen went into detail about the aspects of this particular fire. The fire crew eventually included a large number of Hispanics. Nielsen remembered how they would tip over burnt tree with their bare hands, which they liked, according to Nielsen, more than fighting the fire.
- 130 Smokejumpers were the first people to a fire. They jumped in small groups, because they jumped into small fires to stop them from becoming big fires. Nielsen remembered almost landing on a pickup during one jump near Salmon, because another ground crew was already there. On another fire, the Circle A Fire, lumber crews were already battling the blaze when they smokejumpers arrived.
- 150 Nielsen talked about the three different planes—the Travelaire, the Trimotor Ford, and the DC-3—he jumped from. The DC-3 was very easy to jump from. He continued to discuss the difference between the Travelaire and Trimotor.
- 165 Nielsen furnished his thoughts and opinions about the Mann Gulch Fire in Montana in 1949. He told a story about running back into a fire to the burned-out area to escape the flames. He talked about lighting back fires, which he never did. Nielsen also provided his opinions about the Storm King Fire in Colorado in 1994.
- 215 The lack of communication, according to Nielsen, was a problem at the Storm King Fire. Communication was never a major problem on any of his jumps.

- 230 Nielsen did not think having female smokejumpers was a problem. He told a story about talking to women, who the coffee group was trying to impress with their stories. This woman jumped on three times as many jumps as Nielsen.
- 255 On one jump the crew stayed overnight on a fire because it was a long walk to the landing strip. Nielsen thought that no walk was too long because everyone was in great shape.
- 270 Nielsen said he had no rivalry with his brother. Nielsen was very competitive with his friend and fellow smokejumper, Leo Compton. He told a story about how they were both tricked into separately climbing a rope upside down.
- 295 Nielsen made some good friends and learned how to live and work with people while smokejumping.
- 305 Some smokejumpers were formally in the military during World War II. Nielsen worked in an airplane during the war. Other than that there was little correlation between the Military and fighting fire.
- 325 According to Nielsen rookies were treated as equals during his time as a smokejumper. He does not know why McCall rookie smokejumpers are called "Neds."
- 340 For the most part, Nielsen worked well with everyone at the McCall camp.
- 360 Nielsen recalled a couple of pilots who flew the smokejumpers to the fires, Bob Fogg and Jim Larkin. He told stories about Fogg and Larkin and how they approached each flight. The pilot tried to get the jumpers as close to the fire as possible. They jumped between 1,000 and 2,000 feet from the ground.
- 395 On one jump a man who jumped with Nielsen cracked his tail bone. Nielsen told that story about getting that man off of the mountain. On that fire they—two more people jumped on that fire—left a bunch of material at the fire sight.
- 517 **END OF SIDE TWO**
END OF INTERVIEW

NAMES AND PLACES INDEX

Black Mountain (Oregon)
Boise Junior College
Boise National Forest
Brundage Mountain, Idaho
Chamberlain Basin (Idaho)
Circle A Fire (Idaho)
Compton, Leo
Davidson, "Toad" Roger
Fogg, Bob
Foresters' Club (McCall)
Hells Canyon
Hidden Springs, Idaho
Johnson, Lloyd
Lake Club (McCall)
Larkin, Jim
Mann Gulch Fire (Montana)
Mansisidor, Ray
McCall, Idaho
Nampa, Idaho
Nez Perce National Forest
Nielsen, Glen "Ace"
Payette National Forest
Peterson, Richard "Paperlegs"
Peterson, Seymour "Pete"
Pulaski (tool for fighting forest fires)
Salmon River
Salmon, Idaho
Schrieber, George
Sheep Creek, Idaho
Snake River
Storm King Fire (Colorado)
Webb, Wayne